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“Cup of Humanity”—an Experiment in Equitable Group Dynamics

Abstract

“Cup of Humanity” is a format for group discussion in which assigned groups of four students (rotating every time) practice the host/guest relationship of the Japanese tea ceremony (Chanoyu) so that everyone gets the chance to speak, listen, and be heard by each classmate. This involves literally serving tea to each other. I devised this format through an integration of techniques learned from workshops and conferences on inclusive pedagogy, on one hand, and a rather loose interpretation of the principle of the Japanese tea ceremony, on the other. This report details the pedagogical principles that inspired the format as well as the implementation of “Cup of Humanity” discussions during my Fall 2016 course, Transnational Japan.

Keywords

Humanity, Chanoyu, inclusiveness, inclusive pedagogy, group discussion

Background

I have struggled to ensure equitable participation in my classroom. Certain techniques have worked to a degree for me, such as learning student names during the first week of classes and calling on students at random, so that no student goes through a full class period without the opportunity to speak. While this has helped, there are always students who dominate the discussion, and try as I may to give equal time to each student, the eager hands get called on first. Thus, I have sought suggestions for facilitating

equitable group discussions. This write-up details how I took principles for facilitating classroom equity that I learned in Mellon-grant workshops and applied them to in-class, small-group discussions through the vehicle of the Japanese tea ceremony. This was an attempt to wed techniques for promoting equitable group discussion to the content of my course, Transnational Japan.

Since early 2016, I have been a member of the Humanities cohort for the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation grant, *Faculty Formation to Support Learning for All*, which aims to “address successfully teaching, advising and engaging American students of color at CSB/SJU in the liberal arts.” In light of this, I committed to “change one identifiable piece of a course, revised in light of what you learn from the conference or the workshop, to better meet the goals of the grant.” Before settling on a specific change to a course, I decided that Transnational Japan would be an appropriate course for thinking about inclusive engagement. The course already approached Japanese studies from a multicultural, anti-racist perspective and thematized issues of identity as imposed from the outside and in terms of self-images. Therefore, I saw the content of the course itself as already conducive to the aims of the grant.

The Principles

However, I wanted to change the delivery of the content, specifically how the students tackled the material collaboratively. For this task, I drew on an Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) Conference presentation, as well as a CSB/SJU workshop, both conducted by A.T. Miller of Cornell University. His handout “Guidelines for Discussion Participation” provided me with a launch pad for devising my plan. These guidelines emphasized having clear expectations for the students for “how they communicate with others” so that they are “held accountable for communicating in respectful ways with everyone who is participating.” The first two guidelines for developing “an atmosphere of mutual respect and collective inquiry” are:

Respect others' right to hold opinions and beliefs that differ from your own—challenge or criticize the idea, not the person.

Listen carefully to what others are saying even when you disagree with what is being said: comments that you make (asking for clarification, sharing critiques, expanding on a point, etc.) should reflect that you have paid attention to the speaker's comments.

In Transnational Japan, students learn about the Japanese tea ceremony (Chanoyu) and Japan's most renowned tea master, Sen no Rikyū. Reflecting on the above discussion guidelines, I saw resonances with Chanoyu. At its heart, Chanoyu is about creating a space where a host can make a guest comfortable through recognition of the guest's worth as a human being, no matter of status or rank. Sen no Rikyū says, "In the tea ceremony the guest of honor always takes the head seat, no matter how high-born or lowly he may be" (Ueda 89). The entrance to a tea hut, the nijiriguchi, is a small crawl space. To enter through it is an exercise in humility for both host and guest. Some "rules" of Chanoyu (paraphrased) include:

- Social status ought not invade the tea room
- Room should be sparsely decorated
- Only wear simple clothes
- Strive for (a refined) poverty and modesty
- Be scant and imperfect

The Application

While the opportunity to learn authentic Japanese Chanoyu would be educationally valuable, for my purposes, I was interested in devising a simple, but meaningful adaptation that could fit within my specific classroom objectives. I wanted to create an atmosphere in which each student had a chance to lead a conversation (as "host"), and for others' contributions to be

deliberately heard (as “guest”). Thus, I created a hybrid between the basics of Chanoyu and the type of guidelines provided by A.T. Miller with the following principles:

- Revere the “guest”
- Listen closely to the other
- Ensure everyone is heard
- Allow room for mistakes and imperfection
- Embody the refined and elegant poverty of the tea ceremony (for my budget, this means tea bags, hot water, and paper cups)

With those principles in mind, I had my students serve tea to each other as part of group discussions.

I named the exercise “Cup of Humanity” after the title of the first chapter of Okakura Kakuzō’s *Book of Tea* (published in English in 1906). The premise of the tea ceremony, Chanoyu, is to establish harmony through deep respect and reverence for the other in a context stripped of the importance of rank and status. The objective of every “Cup of Humanity” discussion, therefore, was listen to each other deeply, serve each other tea, and have the opportunity to speak intimately with each classmate.

Each discussion group would have four students—one serving as “host” and the other three as “guests.” The host’s role was to fetch and pour tea for the guests (if they wanted it) and to moderate the discussion by asking questions, listening, and then following up with further questions. The burden was on the host to provide an atmosphere that made everyone comfortable and encouraged all to participate. The role of the guest, on the other hand, was to actively participate and to acknowledge gratitude to the host. By dictating their roles, I wanted their participation to be deliberate and intentional. We held six of these sessions throughout the semester.

For each “Cup of Humanity” session, I would assign groups at random. Over the course of the semester, each student served as host at least once, and each student had a chance to be in a group with every other

student. I would also give students the topic (on a handout) and pose several questions to be addressed. Topics included what it means to be Japanese, U.S. racist stereotypes of Japanese people during WWII, Japanese-American Internment in 1940s, anthropological studies premised on the idea of “getting to know the enemy,” and exploration of other course readings. (Below, I will include an example handout from one such session.)

Findings

Based on my observations (I would constantly move around and listen to the discussions), the “Cup of Humanity” sessions succeeded in limited ways. Every student had a chance to speak, sometimes about rather difficult subjects. They spoke directly to each other more than they did outside the sessions, and they no longer directed their questions/answers exclusively to me, the teacher. Groups formed quickly, which was made possible by flexible furniture on wheels. Probably their favorite part, though, was that they enjoyed drinking tea. For demographic reasons (a whopping nine out of sixteen students were Chinese nationals), the group sessions also succeeded in ensuring that students would speak to each other in English. Were I to not dictate group make-up, invariably the Chinese students would group together and speak only in Chinese.

Given that the Mellon grant’s aim is to support American students of color, I paid close attention to the three student in my class that fit that description—one Japanese-Korean-American, one Hmong-American, and one Mexican-American. While these three contributed frequently to discussions even outside the “Cup of Humanity” sessions, they further demonstrated themselves to be natural leaders when asked to serve as “hosts.” It is hard to say whether the sessions served them better than had we not done them, but since it allowed each of them to speak directly to every other student in the class, I find this aspect important: each student of color could both listen to and then speak to and be heard by every other classmate. Furthermore, this activity allows for such participation without singling out anyone and without drawing attention to its aim of promoting inclusivity.

To conclude, implementing the “Cup of Humanity” sessions as a way to promote equitable group discussions allowed for students to alternate between the facilitating host who listens and responds, on one hand, and the participating guest whose contribution is taken seriously, on the other. I tied concepts I had learned from Mellon grant training to a Japanese theme, but the activity itself really has nothing to do with Japan. For that reason, my “Cup of Humanity” sessions—or call it anything else—could easily be applied in any other classroom context. It certainly does not require tea, but they students enjoyed that aspect, and so did I.

HANDOUT

“Cup of Humanity”

Premise of tea ceremony: Establish harmony through deep respect and reverence for the other in a context stripped of the importance of rank and status.

Objective: Listen to each other deeply, serve each other tea, have opportunity to speak closely with each classmate.

Method: Assemble in groups of 4 students. One will be the host, while the other three will be guests.

Host: Serves tea to the other three (if they want it) and to self. Also, the host is like a moderator—mostly asking questions and listening. The objective is to make all others feel comfortable.

Guest: You are grateful to be hosted. Talk about what you wish to discuss about the topic for discussion.

- Discussion question 1: Have there been class material (readings, videos) you’ve found offensive and want to talk about more?
 - o Host: Ask more questions related to this.
- Discussion question 2: Are there problems with describing the Japanese people as a “paradox” like Benedict does in *Chrysanthemum and the Sword*?
 - o Host: Ask more questions related to this.

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